

Book Reviews

Reluctant Indonesians: Australia, Indonesia, and the future of West Papua

Clinton Fernandes

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Indonesia is Australia's closest neighbour, and in the past decade a number of incidents have highlighted the relationship between these two nations: East Timor's independence in 1999; the Bali Bombings in 2002 and 2005; the attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 2004; the gaoling of Schappelle Corby and the 'Bali Nine' on drug charges in Bali; and the arrival of 43 West Papuans on Australian shores claiming asylum in 2006. It is this last incident that provides the setting for Fernandes' book.

In his introduction, Fernandes states that 'this book is about West Papua's bid for independence and the resulting challenge for Australian foreign policy' (p.4). The book is structured so as to provide an account of Australia's relations with Indonesia, and then moves on to the history of West Papua itself, prior and after its incorporation into Indonesia. Finally, the book takes a critical look at calls for closer ties between Australia and the Indonesian military and what this means for the future of West Papua.

Interest in the issue of West Papuan autonomy was restricted primarily to solidarity groups in Australia until the arrival of the 43 asylum seekers. Their arrival sparked an increase in the number of Australians joining solidarity groups and media coverage. Interest in the issue increased to the extent that a Newspoll, conducted in April 2006, found that over 76.7 per cent of Australians were in favour of self-determination for the people of West Papua. However, as Fernandes points out, 'most Australian policymakers and media commentators are firmly opposed to any talk of self-determination' (p.4).

In his first chapter, Fernandes outlines three 'mantras' that have been used to pacify the public and limit outrage in Australia: 'promote the national interest'; 'stop meddling in Indonesia's affairs'; and 'prevent disintegration, fragmentation, instability'. Fernandes shows the fallacies and hypocrisy of these mantras,

Book Reviews

demonstrating how they have been used by Australian governments to neutralise public outrage over Indonesia's actions in West Papua and elsewhere.

After showing how Australian governments have pacified the public, Fernandes conducts an analysis of the history of meddling by foreign nations, including Australian and the United States, in Indonesia, noting the hypocrisy of the Australian government's calls for people to 'stop meddling in Indonesia's affairs'. After Indonesia obtained independence from the Dutch after World War II Sukarno, a popular nationalist and leading opponent of colonialism became president. Sukarno's presidency saw widespread support for the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). These developments led to concerns within western countries of an increase in anti-colonial and pro-communist feelings within Indonesia, and the possibility that this could lead to similar developments in other countries.

In reaction to these developments, the US and Australia began to implement plans to lessen Sukarno's power. Over the next decade or so, the US and Australia: encouraged rebellions; tried to strengthen provincial leaders in an attempt to help them defy Sukarno; undertook airdrops of weapons for rebels; and finally, began to support the Indonesian military. This support led to the dictatorship of General Suharto, which included anti-PKI massacres, described in a study by the CIA as, 'in terms of the numbers killed, ... one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s' (p.41).

Suharto remained Indonesian president until his resignation on 21 May 1998, much of this time with at least tacit support from Australia. As Fernandes notes, 'many Australian politicians, diplomats, and media commentators would come to strike heroic poses regarding human rights violations elsewhere in the world, yet remain silent about Suharto for the duration of his 32 years in office' (p.43).

Having outlined the meddling of Australia and US in Indonesia since the end of WWII, Fernandes progresses to an analysis of West Papuan history. Again, Fernandes focuses on events post-WWII, including Dutch control of Indonesia and then the establishment of an independent United States of Indonesia. Until 1961, Australia

Book Reviews

supported Dutch control of West Papua, but in an attempt to avoid antagonising Indonesia, Australia's minister for external affairs issued a statement that referred to Australia's 'great interest in the ability of the indigenous people of West New Guinea to have the ultimate choice of their own future, whether it be for integration with Indonesia or for independence' (pp.52-53).

A method to determine the future of West Papuan sovereignty was decided in 1962, with an agreement (the 'New York Agreement') providing for the transfer of West Papua to an interim United Nations Temporary Executive Authority until 1 May 1963, after which there would be a longer period of Indonesian administration. The agreement also stated that before the end of 1969, the territory's inhabitants were 'to participate in the act of self-determination to be carried out in accordance with international practice' (pp.55-56). By 1969 Suharto was in power, and the system for deciding West Papuan sovereignty involved 1022 West Papuans (approximately one-tenth of one per cent of the population), hand picked by Indonesia. As Fernandes correctly notes, 'it came as little surprise, therefore, when every single one of them agreed to join Indonesia' (p.59). This decision was later described by the responsible UN under-secretary as a 'whitewash'.

In chapter 4, Fernandes notes how, as an Indonesian province, West Papua suffered under the Suharto regime. Many Papuans attempted to flee this suffering. Fernandes notes that in 1964, the 'Menzies government decided not to allow West Papuan refugees to settle in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea because to do so 'could start migration of such numbers as might burden the people receiving them and create administrative and other problems'' (p.61). Although not noted by Fernandes, this is reminiscent of the Howard Government's reaction to refugees 40 years later.

Although a number of West Papuans attempted to leave the territory, many also stayed. Those who stayed suffered at the hands of the Indonesian government. Human rights abuses were commonplace, and combined with the Indonesian government family-planning program, they contributed limited the size of the West Papuan indigenous population. Combined with large migration from other Indonesian provinces, this stalling in the size of the indigenous population has led to a shrinking in the proportion of the West Papuan population who are indigenous. One reason for

Book Reviews

the encouragement of migration from other provinces was to instil a sense of 'Indonesian-ness' in West Papuans. The result was the opposite, with a sense of West Papuan nationalism emerging.

Fernandes then outlines how this emerging West Papuan nationalism led to a resistance movement, including the formation of the TPN (*Tentara Pembebasan Nasional*, or National Liberation Army). The weapons of the TPN are no match to the Indonesian military, but as Fernandes notes, "they were quite useful in that they provided a convenient justification for greater military repression" (p.78).

Leaving behind discussion of the political and social issues of West Papua, Fernandes moves on to look at its physical environment. This chapter examines the 'treasure trove' that is the West Papuan landscape, in particular the mining operations of PT Freeport Indonesia and Rio Tinto. This examination demonstrates how American and Australian companies have exploited the West Papuan environment, and the damage their mining has done. Suppression of the West Papuan population by the Indonesian government has not only been supported by Australian and American governments, but also by companies from these countries, ensuring their continued detrimental presence in West Papua.

Fernandes then returns to the issue of Indonesia's control of West Papua, noting that the resignation of Suharto in 1998 opened the possibility of independence or autonomy for West Papua. Although Abdurrahman Wahid appeared to be somewhat supportive of West Papuan autonomy, his replacement, Megawati Sukarnoputri instructed the military leadership to 'execute your assignments and responsibilities to you best ability without constantly experiencing anxiety about violating principles of human rights' (p.98).

The key demand by West Papuans is 'merdeka', commonly understood by foreigners to mean independence, but seen by West Papuans as a 'moral crusade for peace and justice on earth' (p.110). This has still not been achieved, with Fernandes believing that the role of the Indonesian military has been central to this. The fact that the Indonesian military is not reliant solely on the Indonesian government for funding means that the military 'operates as a law unto itself' (p.123). Fernandes believes that

Book Reviews

until this issue is corrected, any plans by the Australian government and military to ‘strengthen military links in the form of joint exercises and training threaten to undermine Indonesia’s democratic transition’ (p.124).

Returning to his the first of his three mantras, Fernandes considers that the only way to serve Australia’s national interest is to increase the diplomatic isolation of the Indonesian military, rather than to strengthen links. The opposite of this appears to be happening, with public announcements of further support linking the need for this support to the risk of a break up of the Indonesian archipelago and a flood of refugees sailing towards Australia. However, as Fernandes rightly points out:

If – and this is by no means certain – the state of Indonesia breaks up and a number of newer states are formed, the inhabitants will stay in their new states. If they are trying to flee to Australia now, it is mostly because they face repression at home. (p.132)

The timely release of this book provides a short introduction to what is one of Australia’s most important international relationships. The book is an important, easily accessible contribution to the public’s knowledge regarding the situation in West Papua, Indonesia more generally, and the history of Australian foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

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